

William McDouall (1775-1849)

Vicar 1804-1827

William McDouall's life spanned a time of great change, huge industrial development, improvements in transport and scientific discovery. The Napoleonic Wars were fought whilst he was in Ashby, Jane Austen's novels were published, the first railway opened between Liverpool and Manchester in 1830. In 1831 HMS Beagle set sail with Charles Darwin on board as ship's naturalist and Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837. Britain in 1849, when McDouall died, was a very different country to the one he entered in 1775.

McDouall was born in Scotland, to John McDouall of Glasgow and his wife Mary Isabella McCulloch. His mother died in childbirth in 1778, bringing his sister Isabella into the world. McDouall's uncle, his father's brother, was the 6th Earl of Dumfries and he was related to the Marquess of Bute, McDouall's patron in Luton. McDouall's family is listed in Debrett's Peerage.

William McDouall entered Balliol College, Oxford in 1791, aged 16, graduating with a BA in 1795. He was ordained deacon in London in December 1798 by the Bishop of Coventry & Lichfield and priest on 19th May 1799 at Eccleshall, Staffs. Until 1860, Eccleshall was a residence for the Bishops of Lichfield.

His first posting, in December 1798, was as stipendiary curate of Darley, which may have been St Helen's Church in Darley Dale, but this is not clear. On 14th January 1804, he was instituted vicar of St Helen's Church, Ashby, by George Pretyman, Bishop of Lincoln, under the patronage of Earl Francis Rawdon Hastings, Earl of Moira. He held this post until 1827 and added to it the perpetual curacy of Smisby in 1812.

Little is known about his first ten years in Ashby, but on 7th February 1815 he married Euphemia Gaudin by licence. Euphemia was the daughter of John Gaudin, a wine and brandy merchant in the town, who was born Jean Gaudin in Switzerland in 1741. Gaudin was butler at nearby Calke Abbey in 1778 but disappeared from the account books there in 1782, though he returned to Calke to marry Euphemia KcKinsie in 1790, by which time he was in partnership with John Slater in the wine and brandy business. He later bought his partner out. When he died, in 1817, he left all his money and assets with his son in law, the Rev McDouall, to be managed on behalf of his two daughters. His eldest daughter, Euphemia after her mother, was baptised at Calke on 7th August 1791.¹

A handwritten marriage record on aged paper. The text is written in cursive ink. It reads: 'William McDouall Esq of this Parish a Bachelor and Euphemia Gaudin of this Parish and a Spinster were married in this Church by Licence with Consent of this Parson this Seventh Day of February in the Year One thousand eight hundred and fifteen By me William Southworth Vicar of this Parish This Marriage was solemnized between us { William McDouall Euphemia Gaudin In the Presence of { John Gaudin Mary Barnell No. 83.'

Record in St Helen's Parish Registers of the marriage of McDouall with Euphemia Gaudin²

Nine children were born to William and Euphemia McDouall in rapid succession. Flora Euphemia was baptised on 26th May 1816, Mary Isabella on

¹ Thanks to Karen Kreft, Calke Abbey researcher, for this information.

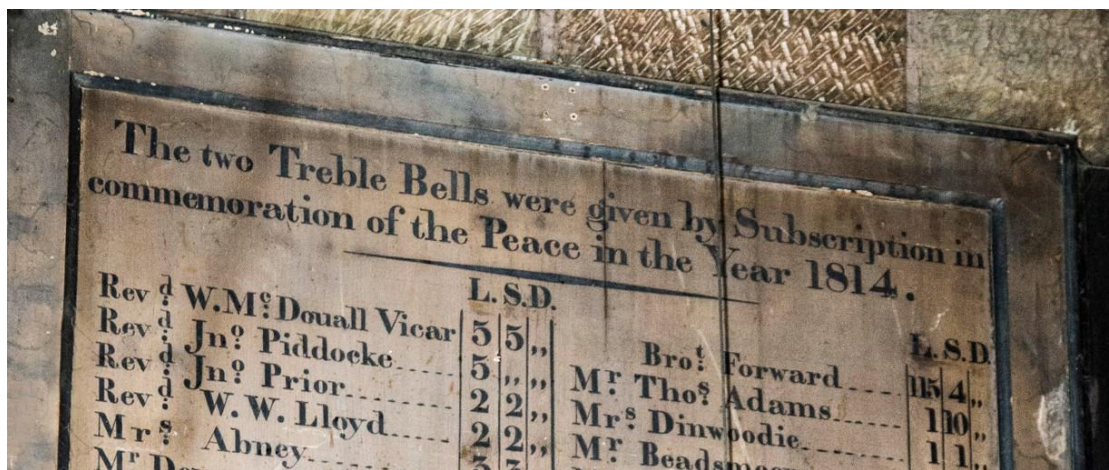
² St Helen's Parish Records. Accessed via Find My Past.

6th July 1817, John Crichton Stuart on 12th July 1818, Elizabeth Caroline on 12th June 1819, William Sutherland on 7th July 1820, Penelope Eleonora on 12th October 1821, Patrick George on 29th September 1822 and twins Hastings & Rawdon on 21st September 1823. The twins must have been named for their father's Patron, Francis Rawdon Hastings. From the point of her marriage, the longest time between the births of Euphemia's babies was 15 months. Mostly, they appeared at 12 month intervals and the arrival of the twins in September 1823 was evidently the final straw for Euphemia, who was buried at St Helen's on 9th January 1824. She was just 32 years old.

All of the McDouall children survived to adulthood apart from the eldest, Flora Euphemia, who was buried, aged 9, at St Helen's on 31st August 1825. A memorial plaque to Euphemia and Flora hangs in the church vestry.



McDouall was vicar at St Helen's at an interesting time in the town. Many French prisoners of war were billeted with Ashby families and there were several marriages, baptisms and funerals of French prisoners at St Helen's, all but one conducted by McDouall. McDouall's name is on the board in the Ringing Chamber at St Helen's as a donor of five guineas towards the two new treble bells which were installed to give thanks when the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1814. His future father-in-law, John Gaudin, donated £5.



Detail from a board in St Helen's Church Tower, showing donations for the purchase of new bells.

A Terrier for 1825 survives in the Lincoln Records Office. It records the details of vicarage, church and church owned land in the parish of Ashby, giving a value of 'Glebe, tithes and profits of the vicarage' at £300 per year.³

William McDouall appears to have carried out his basic duties as a parish priest in Ashby. His handwriting and his signature dominate the church registers from 30th January 1804 to his leaving at

³ Terrier (1825). Lincoln Records Office.

the end of 1827. There are also several entries in January and February 1828 signed by McDouall as 'Vicar of Luton Bedfordshire.'

He was appointed vicar of St Mary's, Luton, on 20th December 1827, acquiring the post due to being a relative of the patron, the Marquess of Bute, who had a residence at Luton Hoo. St Mary's was at that time the largest parish in Bedfordshire, with a diameter of approximately thirty miles. Like St Helen's, it was also at that time in the enormous Diocese of Lincoln. In 1837, Luton became part of the Diocese of Ely whilst Ashby moved into the Diocese of Peterborough. McDouall became a Canon of Peterborough Cathedral in 1831.

McDouall left Ashby for his new home at Copt Hall, near his patron's home just to the south-east of Luton. Both are now separated from the town by the runway of Luton Airport. His curate, Thomas Sykes, lived in St Mary's vicarage and appears to have done all the work whilst McDouall lived the life of a gentleman, travelling around the district '*in a large yellow carriage featuring a coachman up front and two footmen in the back.*'⁴

McDouall's life in Luton is better documented than his life in Ashby, but he isn't viewed in a positive light. Shortly after he arrived, the parish church of St Mary's was re-pewed. The old high square pews were removed and oblong pews were installed, some with and some without doors. Although the 600 'sittings' created in the church were declared to be 'free' some were freer than others. The better pews were appropriated by the better off and poorer people sat on narrow benches in the centre of the nave and towards the west end. The vicar and squires kept their private pews.

Dr Hall, who preceded William McDouall as vicar of Luton, was officially in charge for 23 years, but he was absent and the curate did the work. McDouall's tenure appears to have been similar. By 1847, the church was

*'in a most disgraceful condition ... If any one were to ask us which of the Bedfordshire churches exhibits most completely everything that is distressing to a true churchman, we should answer, 'the most beautiful one,' and continue, 'Go to Luton, and as you pass along the town you will see in the vast piles of buildings recently raised for the purposes of trade and commerce evidences of increasing wealth and prosperity, and you will find the inhabitants showing forth their gratitude to Him from whom these blessings come, by erecting for themselves spacious and substantial mansions, furnished with every contrivance for comfort that the extravagant luxury of the nineteenth century has called forth, and with cold indifference leaving the House of God to crumble into ruins ... surely there must be some great dereliction of duty in any pastor who suffers so many of his flock to desert the true fold.'*⁵

Apparently, when gas lighting arrived in Luton McDouall was urged to install it in the church as many of St Mary's parishioners were beginning to attend evening services in churches which already used gas lighting. McDouall didn't trust the technology and vetoed the idea.⁶

McDouall died in office on 22nd December 1849 after 22 years as vicar of St Mary's and was buried '*in the family vault in the chancel of Luton church.*'⁷ Among the mourners were his two sons, Rev William Sutherland McDouall and Rev Patrick McDouall, his son in law and his curate, the Rev

⁴ The Stories and Secrets of Luton's Medieval Jewel by Katheryne Rogers (2000). P102.

⁵ Northampton Mercury, 27 February 1847. Written by W.A. Feb 22nd 1847

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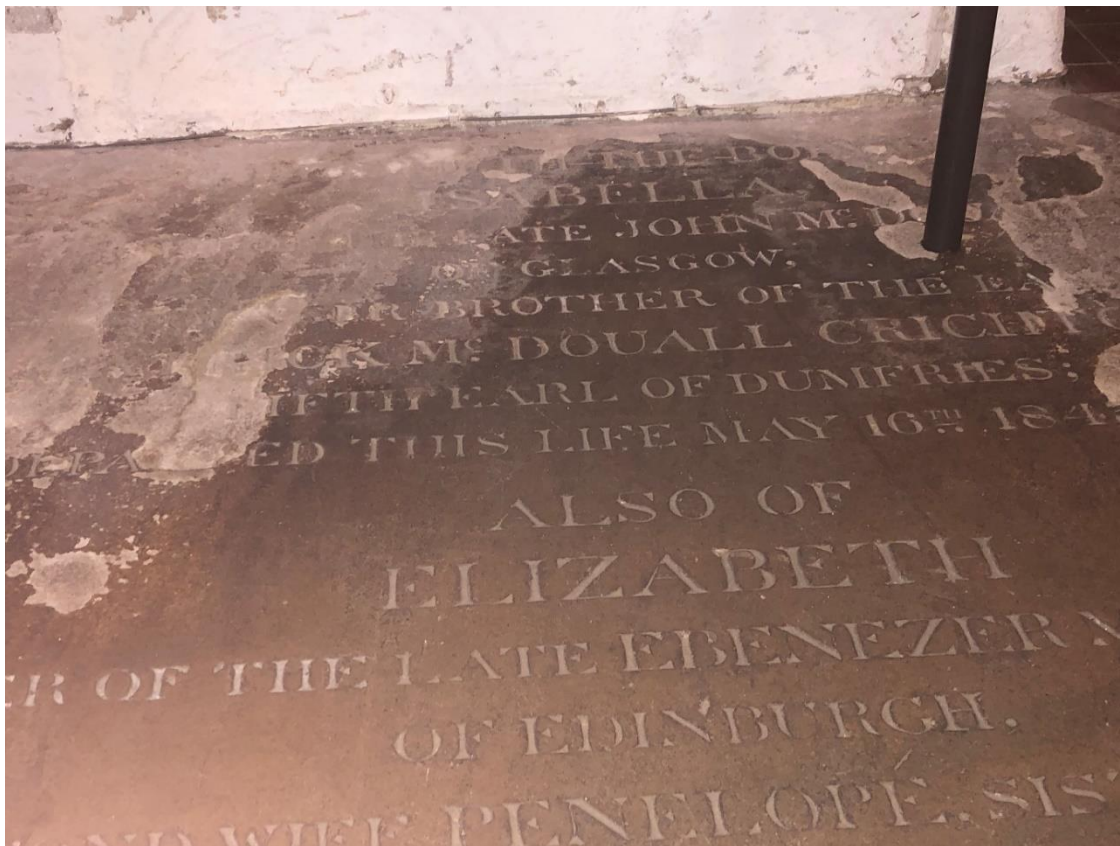
⁷ Hertford Mercury and Reformer, 29 December 1849.

Thomas Sykes, who was to succeed him and become the first active vicar of St Mary's for half a century.

Thomas Sykes preached a sermon of tribute to McDouall on the following Sunday, describing him thus:

*'... as a friend he was faithful, honest and sincere; honourable in every transaction of life; courteous to all; and of the strictest probity and integrity. Collectively, we have lost a friend, in whom we could place the utmost confidence – whose word was his bond, and who never swerved from the straight line of truth and equity; and I feel individually that, under any circumstances, I should belie my own proper feelings if I were not to drop one word on this occasion as a tribute of deep respect, to the memory of one with whom I was happily and intimately associated in the bonds of friendship for upwards of twenty years. Such I know was the benevolence of his disposition that he could not do an unkind act to any one – no one could ever approach him without being impressed with this – an enemy he had not I am sure in his own breast. His charity was unostentatious, and his benevolence extended to all classes; he wished the welfare of all; he was firmly and sincerely attached to our scriptural church and liturgy, and in his dying hours evinced to me this attachment by his enjoyment of her services. As a magistrate and a subject he was upright, loyal, steady and consistent. He was, in a word, a Christian, in whom there was no 'guile.' As a parent he was considerate, tender and most affectionate.'*⁸

It all sounds a bit tongue in cheek.



Detail from McDouall's grave slab in St Mary's Church, Luton.

⁸ Hertford Mercury and Reformer, 29 December 1849.

McDouall was buried alongside his sister, Isabella McDouall and his aunt, Elizabeth McCulloch, who had both been living with him at Luton Hoo. The grave slab was moved from the Chancel to the South Transept during late 19th Century Church Renovations.

Julie Starkey

January 2022

Revised May 2022

I am indebted to Peter Adams, Director of St Marys Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in Luton, for sending me information, maps and the photograph of McDouall's grave above. Photo of memorial to Euphemia McDouall by Paul Burrows.